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Julian of Norwich, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and the status of suffering in Christian Theology

In any Christian vision of things, the relationship between love and suffering will be significant.¹ One cannot operate within a tradition which has the cross as its central symbol without, it would seem, somehow thinking about suffering and love in close proximity. But *how* one should think about love and suffering together is not so obvious--this is not something on which the tradition is clear. The aim of this essay is to explore this issue through a juxtaposition of the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Julian of Norwich.

Julian and Balthasar, while similar in certain ways, show sharply divergent sensibilities as regards this question of the relationship of love to suffering. They can, I will propose, be considered representatives of two quite different strands within the Christian tradition, and an exploration of their thought will allow us to examine some of the broader implications of the differing positions they represent.

I

Although Julian and Balthasar are not usually treated together, there are a series of interesting points of contact between them. Each, though eventually influential, did much of his or her writing from a position of ecclesial marginality. Julian writes as a woman and in the vernacular, not a part of any 'school' theology, and her status as an anchoress puts her on the edge of several worlds, neither a member of a monastic community nor an ordinary lay woman². For

¹ I am grateful to the sisters of Congregation of La Retraite—Ireland UK, whose support for the "Love and Suffering" project made possible the completion of this paper.

² Denys Turner, in *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011) draws attention, among other things, to Julian's

Balthasar there was a more active process of marginalization. He left the Jesuits in 1950, out of commitment to his joint work with Adrienne von Speyr. Leaving a religious order was not something which, before the Second Vatican Council, was easily countenanced, and as a result Balthasar suffered from real ecclesial isolation. He was, for instance, the only serious theologian of his generation who was *not* invited to Vatican II. He never held an academic position, and his writings, like the writing of Julian, do not take a standard academic form. That is to say that his work, like hers, was not shaped by students, colleagues, editors, or the demands of an academic curriculum.³

There is in both authors, secondly, a style that is sometimes described as a ‘vernacular’. This goes beyond the fact that they write, respectively, in English and German rather than Latin, and even beyond the fact that neither writes for a strictly academic or scholastic audience—there is a kind of familiarity towards the reader, an immediacy and directness with the reader that is always a feature of Julian’s writings, and often a feature of Balthasar’s.

In both cases there is an interesting blurring of boundaries between what one might call a spiritual and even visionary writing, and theology proper. Balthasar described his work as a ‘kneeling theology’, and wrote an influential critique of the separation of spirituality and theology in an essay entitled

marginality as an anchoress. He suggests that ‘all these forms of marginality contribute to a freedom of vocabulary and image, an expansiveness of thought, and a singularity of theological emphasis that set her apart from mainstream styles of medieval theology’ (16).

³ In *Balthasar: a (very) critical introduction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2012) I have suggested that this set of circumstances contribute to an ‘unfettered’ quality in Balthasar’s theology, which might be construed as both its strength and its weakness.

“Theology and Sanctity”.⁴ His thought, furthermore, was deeply shaped by his association with the mystic and visionary Adrienne von Speyr. He insisted their work was two halves of a single whole, and could not be separated, and there are at least points where the interpenetration of von Speyr’s experience and Balthasar’s theology is very clear (in the final volume of his *Theodrama*, for instance, and in his account of Christ’s descent into hell).⁵ In Julian’s work the influential visions and experiences are her own. But she is very far from a mere passive reporter of past experiences--she is now recognized as “one of the great speculative theologians of the Middle Ages”⁶.

So in both cases we have a theologian writing from the margins, in a vernacular style, and in a way which transgresses or at least ignores expected boundaries between mystic and visionary on the one hand and intellectual on the other. Two other similarities are worth at least a briefly noting. Both have become known for the role *gender* plays in their theology. In Balthasar’s thought notions of male activity and female receptivity make an appearance on many levels, coming into his treatment of everything from the inner Trinitarian life to the assent of faith to the relations between priests and laity. He is the most powerful exponent of the so-called nuptial theology which emerged as such a

⁴ ‘Theology and Sanctity’ in *Explorations in Theology Volume I: The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989).

⁵ The two cases are slightly different. The final volume of the *Theo-drama* quotes very heavily from von Speyr’s writings, and in this sense the influence is unmissable. Balthasar’s reliance on von Speyr in relation to Holy Saturday and the descent into Hell is not so explicit textually, but most commentators presume that there must be a connection between his quite novel and idiosyncratic proposals and her annually repeated experiences during Holy Week.

⁶ Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), p. ix.

significant and strange development in late 20th century Catholic theology.⁷ In Julian gender and theology intertwine in a less systematic but no less striking way: in many quarters, in fact, she is principally known for statements such as “our Saviour is our true mother, in whom we are eternally born and by whom we shall always be enclosed”, or “The mother can give her child her milk to suck, but our dear mother Jesus can feed us with himself”.⁸ In both thinkers, secondly, there seems a certain leaning towards universalism, although neither of them directly asserts a doctrine of universal salvation, and in Julian’s case there is a degree of dispute about what she in fact intends.⁹

II

The writings of Julian and Balthasar, then, show a range of intriguing similarities. For the purposes of my explorations in this paper, it is one further similarity which is most significant, however: in each *suffering* plays a prominent role.

⁷ Cf. Fergus Kerr’s *Twentieth Century Catholic Theologians* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006) for a discussion of nuptial theology and an indication of its striking novelty against the background of earlier 20th century Catholic thought.

⁸ These statements are found in chapters 57 and 60 of Julian’s Long Text. All quotations from Julian in this article are from this Long Text, and for ease of reading, they are drawn from Penguin Classics translation by Elizabeth Spearing, *Revelations of Divine Love* (London: Penguin Books, 1998). Where my argument depends on issues of detail, the Middle English text (from Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, eds., *The Writings of Julian of Norwich* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State Press, 2006) will be given in the notes.

⁹ Cf. Balthasar’s *Dare We Hope ‘That All Men Shall be Saved’? with A Short Discourse on Hell* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988) for his reflections on the question of universal salvation. Julian mentions a desire for a complete vision of hell and purgatory but then writes ‘as for this desire, I could learn nothing about it’ (33). However, alongside the absence of a vision of Hell, the denial of anger in God, and the radically positive affirmation of God’s love, stands her repeated insistence that she accepts the faith of the Church in its entirety, and this, as she understands it, includes an insistence that there is indeed a (populated) hell.

Balthasar's claim that there is something like suffering, a kind of analogical suffering, in the inner life of the eternal Trinity has attracted considerable scholarly scrutiny. Most of the attention, however, has focused on how the proposal relates to a traditional understanding of God—does Balthasar, or does he not, deny divine immutability and impassibility?¹⁰ Something which has drawn less notice is how this proposal relates to a broader interest in and evaluation of suffering in Balthasar's work. What he says about something-like-suffering in God, in other words, should not be thought of as standing on its own, but is one expression of a positive valuation of suffering running throughout his thought.¹¹

One of the places Balthasar's positive valuation of suffering makes itself felt, unsurprisingly, is in his reflections on the cross. He is driven towards a kind of maximalism here-- the more that can be said of Christ's suffering, it seems, the better. So Balthasar affirms with Pascal that Christ's agony lasts until the end of the world. He writes that because of Christ's 'filial intimacy with the Father', he can 'suffer *total* abandonment by the Father and taste that suffering *to the last drop*'.¹² He represents Christ's sufferings as exceeding and in some sense containing all other suffering, writing of 'wounds which transcend all inner-worldly hurts'¹³ and of Christ's suffering as 'towering far above chronological

¹⁰ Cf. for instance Gerard O'Hanlon's excellent *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹¹ I first drew attention to the suffering-laden atmosphere of Balthasar's theology in Chapter 5 of *Balthasar: a (very) critical introduction*.

¹² *Truth is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), p. 169, emphasis added

¹³ *Elucidations* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998) p. 84.

time'.¹⁴ 'Never,' he tells us in his collection of aphorisms, 'will an individual man or the totality of all humanity even approximately grasp and encompass these sufferings'.¹⁵

There is also a distinct focus on suffering in Balthasar's understanding of the Christian life. Self-loss and humiliation regularly appear as key elements in the Christian life. The act of faith is fundamentally understood as an act of sacrifice of the self, and love in Balthasar's writing is almost always presented in close connection with renunciation and self-abnegation.¹⁶

A particularly privileged form of the Christian life, furthermore, as Balthasar envisions it, is to be allowed mystically to share in Christ's passion. This is how he understands the dark night of the soul of the mystics, and the intense sufferings of Adrienne von Speyr. His preoccupation with this notion of a sharing in the passion is strong—so much so that it leads to some familiar scriptural passages being read in an unfamiliar way. When in the gospel of John Jesus says to Mary 'This is your son' and to John 'This is your mother', for instance, Balthasar construes this not as an act of care or provision of any kind, but as a gesture of *rejection*: Jesus here is denying Mary as his own mother. He is causing her to experience divine abandonment, in order to allow her to share in his passion. Or again, when Jesus cries at the death of Lazarus, as Balthasar reads it, he is weeping for the suffering of Martha and Mary. In itself this is a traditional bit of exegesis, but what is unfamiliar in Balthasar's account is that he is weeping for the suffering of Martha and Mary that *he himself has caused*. That is to say, by

¹⁴ *The Grain of Wheat: Aphorisms* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 70.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ In this connection, see also Ben Quash's discussion of the role of *Gelassenheit* in Balthasar's thought, in *Theology and the Drama of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

temporarily abandoning them—by his delay in coming to see them-- he has drawn them into his own coming experience of divine abandonment, his own passion.

Balthasar nowhere writes a whole treatise on suffering, and perhaps, because it does not become *explicit* subject for reflection, its importance in his thought can be missed. But important it is: if one begins to look, one can detect a kind of fascination with suffering at nearly every level in his writings.¹⁷

In Julian's *Revelations* the prominent role of suffering is harder to overlook, even to the most casual reader. Julian begins the story of her visions by explaining how, earlier in life, she had asked God for three gifts, one of which was a vivid perception of the passion: in particular, she 'longed to be shown [Christ] in the flesh so that [she] might have more knowledge of [his] bodily suffering'. Another of her requests was to have an experience of dying: 'I longed eagerly to be on my death-bed, so that ... I might myself believe I was dying... I longed to have in this sickness every kind of suffering both of body and soul that I would experience if I died, with all the terror and turmoil of the fiends' (2).

In the experience which is at the centre of *Revelations of Divine Love*, God grants Julian both these wishes. At the age of 30 and a half she falls deathly ill and receives the last rites of the Church. She lingers on, and then, on what really seems to be the point of death, her eyes on a crucifix, she again requests to be filled with the 'remembrance and feeling of his Passion; for I wanted his pains to be my pains...' (3).¹⁸ The visions which follow include some vivid representations of Christ's blood. Julian sees in her first vision 'the red blood trickling down from

¹⁷ Further examples are given below.

¹⁸ "...For I wolde that his paines were my paines..."

under the crown of thorns, hot and fresh and very plentiful' (4), and in her fourth she sees 'the body of Christ bleeding abundantly, in weals from the scourging.' She tells us that 'the fair skin was very deeply broken down into the tender flesh, sharply slashed all over the dear body; the hot blood ran out so abundantly that no skin or wound could be seen, it seemed to be all blood' (12). Her visions also contain powerful images of Christ's thirst and the drying out of his body as his death draws closer: 'as it appeared to me, the nose shriveled and dried, and the dear body was dark and black, quite transformed from his own fair living colour into parched mortification'. She tells us that it seemed to her that 'Loss of blood and pain drying him from within, and blasts of wind and cold coming from without, met together in the dear body of Christ. And these four, two without and two within, gradually dried the flesh of Christ as time passed...So I saw Christ's dear flesh dying, seemingly bit by bit, drying up with amazing agony' (16).

III

In each of these theologians, then, one meets a positive presentation of suffering. Julian prays to experience suffering, and details visions in which Christ's sufferings in the passion are graphically emphasized. Balthasar places self-abnegation and humiliation at the centre of his understanding of the Christian life; like Julian he emphasizes the extent of Christ's suffering in the passion; and he proposes that there is something like suffering at the very heart of the eternal divine life.

If in each case there is a positive presentation of suffering, however, the two presentations are positive in *different* ways—a fundamentally different sensibility is at work in the two theologians, in spite of all the similarities.

Let me begin with Julian. She can shock the modern reader, it is true, with her intense evocations of aspects of Christ's suffering, and with her prayer to experience mortal illness. But jostling alongside her focus on suffering we find some of the most intensely, unequivocally *positive* language about God's love in the whole of the Christian tradition. She writes of his kindness and gentleness and mercy, his courteousness, his comforting, his homely intimacy, of his desire and delight in us, of his love and longing for us, of his rejoicing in us, of his joy in our salvation. When Julian writes of God's love, it is not something which is also mixed or balanced with anger, or sadness, or rebuke: its positive quality is unalloyed, linked only to joy, gladness, delight.

There is of course a role for suffering in Julian's thought, and a link between suffering and redemption. She presumes Christ's sufferings play a key part in our salvation. She presumes also that the depth of his suffering reveals something of the depth of his love, which no doubt contributes to her desire to have a fuller appreciation of the passion. And finally, she assumes that in this life we do in fact suffer, that this suffering is linked to sin, and that it needs to be accepted. But while there is a link between suffering and salvation in her vision, there is also a distinct *contrast* between them. Thus the sufferings in Christ's passion, while much magnified in her contemplation, are nevertheless finite, fixed to a particular time. They are temporal, not eternal. Christ suffered, but he does not now suffer. At a number of points in fact she goes out of her way to underline this: when she writes of her own pain at the thought of Christ's pain, for instance, she is careful to add 'though I knew full well he only suffered

once'(17).¹⁹ Elsewhere, she describes the Passion as a 'noble, glorious deed performed *at one particular time* through the action of love, love which has *always* existed and will never end' (22).²⁰ Or again, she writes that 'all that [God] has done for us, and all that he does, and ever will do, was never a loss or burden to him... except what he did in our human form, beginning at the precious incarnation and lasting until the blessed resurrection on Easter morning; that was the only loss and burden that he bore to accomplish our redemption, a redemption in which he rejoices eternally' (23).²¹ There is, then, a very deliberate and repeated contrast between a particular suffering in time, bounded by a beginning and an end, and an eternal and unending love and rejoicing.

What applies to the passion also applies to our own suffering in this life, which is contrasted to the joy and delight of what is promised eternally. In some passages it is true that she writes of a correlation between the two—the more we have had to suffer, the more we will later be rewarded—but it is still a correlation of things which stand in sharp *contrast*.

The theological atmosphere of Balthasar's work is very different. The concern with suffering here is not one element among others, but is diffused throughout his writings, present at every stage. Suffering in a sense colours the whole, in one way or another permeating almost every level of his thought, up to and including, as already mentioned, his thought on the immanent Trinity. Once

¹⁹ 'For I wiste wel he sufferede but onys...' .

²⁰ 'For the paine was a noble, precious, and wurshipfulle dede done in a time by the working of love. And love was without beginning, is, and shall be without ende.'

²¹ 'Alle that he hath done for us, and doeth, and ever shalle, was never cost ne charge to him ne might be, but only that he did in our manhede, beginning at the swete incarnation, and lasting to the blessed uprising on Ester morrow. So long dured the cost and the charge about our redemption in deed, of which dede he enjoyeth endlessly, as it is befor said'.

one begins to notice this dimension of Balthasar's theology, it is hard to escape. In a single, relatively slim volume of ecclesiology (the second volume of *Explorations in Theology*), for example, one can find references to the Church in its sinful members as 'borne by the suffering members', to the 'inner mystery of suffering' that the Constantinian church of glory hid, to the true Christian spirit as 'the will to poverty, abasement and humility', to the 'real, fruitful humiliation' of Peter, which was not a 'mere exercise in humiliation', to a humility which, because we are sinners, must be 'instilled into us by humiliation', to 'self-abnegation in the service of Christ' as the only way to reveal Christ's own self-abnegation, to a self-abnegation that liturgical piety requires-- one which indeed Balthasar describes as 'this violent, this often "crucifying" sacrifice of the pious subject to the ecclesial object'--, and to 'complete self-abnegation and obedience to the hierarchy' as something Charles de Foucauld rightly commended.²²

It is a telling mark of the atmosphere of Balthasar's thought that even when he expresses thanks to his family, suffering plays the central role. In a retrospective essay written in 1965, after a paragraph on the impossibility of properly acknowledging all that one ought to be thankful for, we find the following:

And where would a man end, if he wanted to begin thanking those of his fellow men who accompanied him on his way, formed him, protected him, made everything possible? Left and right the greetings would have to go: to the nameable and the nameless. A mother is there, who during the course of a long fatal illness dragged herself to Church each morning

²² *Explorations in Theology II: Spouse of the Word*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), pp.179, 16, 14, 114, 188, 27, 30, 25.

to pray for her children. Other close relatives, of whom (to what ends God knows) fearful sufferings were demanded. Only in the light of God will one really know what he has to be thankful for.²³

He is of course thanking his family for nurturing, loving, and educating him—this is presumably all covered in the first sentence cited. But what particularly calls out for gratitude here is, first, the painful prayers of one suffering and dying, and then simply sufferings whose purpose is unknown.

In Balthasar, then, we find a blurring of the distinction between love and loss, love and suffering, at every level of his thought, so that suffering takes on the aura of something *intrinsically* positive. Suffering and loss work their way into the very centre of the Christian vision: he is distinctly disinclined to speak positively of God, or of love, or of Christ, or of the Christian life, without always at the same time making reference to suffering and loss.²⁴

Where in Julian, then, some almost gruesomely vivid descriptions of suffering sit alongside of – and are in the end decisively outstripped by – an utterly positive and joyful evocation of God’s love and God’s nature, Balthasar, quite explicitly rejects the possibility of a conceiving of God in a purely positive way: ‘we have no right’ he writes in the *Theo-Drama*, ‘to regard the Trinity one-

²³ ‘In Retrospect: 1965’ from *My Work: In Retrospect* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993) p. 88.

²⁴ Something fundamental about his thought, in other words, is captured in the following aphorism: ‘The more we come to know God, the more the difference between joy and suffering becomes tenuous: not only do both things become engulfed in the One Will of the Father, but love itself becomes painful, and this pain becomes an irreplaceable bliss.’ *Grain of Wheat*, 13.

sidedly as the “play” of an absolute “blessedness” that abstracts from concrete pain and lacks the “seriousness” of separation and death.’²⁵

IV

Why the difference between the two? Why do we find in Julian’s writings a tone, an atmosphere, so much more vibrantly positive than we do in Balthasar? They lived, of course, in very different eras, and one *might* argue that they are responding to the demands of their contexts. The argument would go something like this: Since in Julian’s time an intense focus on the passion of Christ was commonplace, as was an understanding of suffering as a central component of the Christian life, these elements could be woven into her meditations without becoming their central pre-occupation. Though she does not question the importance of suffering in either the life of Christ or of the Christian, in other words, she has no particular need to emphasize it, but focuses on something more positive. Balthasar, on the other hand, is reacting against what he feels to be a tendency towards a shallow modern optimism, a contemporary fear of and flight from suffering, and so is more actively concerned to stress the place of self-abnegation and loss, of humility and humiliation, in a Christian vision. In very broad terms, one might say that in a dark time Julian stressed the light, and in a flippant era lacking seriousness, Balthasar stressed the dark depths of the faith.

In fact, though, I don’t think it is right to harmonize Julian and Balthasar in this way: I don’t think it is possible to suggest that the different sensibilities they exhibit can be interpreted as merely the result of differing contexts and

²⁵ *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory Volume IV: The Action* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), p. 325.

strategies. There are rather deep and structural theological differences between them.

One way to see this is to consider the relationship of each to the Augustinian *privatio boni* tradition. Julian does not mention Augustine, or the term *privatio boni*, or indeed any Latin or technical term, and yet in her writings the notion of evil as a *privatio boni* is clearly present. As in Augustine and Aquinas, this rests on a strong doctrine of creation and providence: everything which is, is created by God, and so everything which is, is good. In connection with Julian's third revelation, where she sees that God is in everything, she asks 'What is sin? For [she says] I saw truly that God does everything, no matter how small. And...nothing happens by accident or luck, but everything by God's wise providence'. The problem is clear: if 'everything which is done is well done'²⁶ then what can we say about sin? Julian's answer here is simple, if like much in the *privatio boni* tradition, perhaps a bit frustrating to us: 'And here I saw' she writes 'that sin is really not something which is done, for in all this vision no sin appeared' (11).²⁷²⁸

Her denial that sin is 'something which is done', it is worth making clear, is not a reflection of lack of seriousness or a naïve optimism. In fact the question of sin, and why God allowed it to arise in the first place, is, as Denys Turner has

²⁶ Wherefore me behoved nedes to grant that alle thinges that is done is welle done, for our lord God doth all.'

²⁷ Ibid. 'And here I saw sothly that sinne is no dede, for in alle this, sinne was not shewde'.

²⁸ It might be supposed that by introducing the concept of *privatio boni*, I am changing the subject—I have shifted the grounds of the debate from suffering to sin. In fact, however, the two cannot be tidily separated in Julian's thought. Sin is in her view the greatest kind of suffering for a Christian. For Balthasar, a similar kind of intertwining applies, at least as regards the grounds of both sin and suffering in the eternal life of the Trinity

argued forceably, the central theological problem of the work, one around which Julian's thought keeps circling. Sin troubles her deeply. But however troubling and in need of explanation she finds it, she remains within the Augustinian and Thomistic tradition—it is granted no ontological status.

In Balthasar, by contrast, the *privatio boni* tradition is quietly set aside. This happens right at the heart of his soteriology. He affirms that we need to learn of the Trinity from the Cross, and since on the cross he finds alienation and abandonment, we must conclude that there are, not quite alienation and abandonment in the eternal life of the Trinity, but an infinite distance, an incomprehensible separation which can then become, in the economy of salvation, alienation and abandonment. He maintains that this inner-Trinitarian distance is the ground of all created difference and—this is particularly striking-- *of the possibility of sin itself*. So God does not sin, but the possibility of sin is grounded in the Trinity; and in the same way while God does not suffer in the same sense that we do, suffering is analogically rooted in God. In Balthasar's thought, then, sin and suffering are ultimately granted as much reality, as much ontological status, as God's good creation.

So the contrasting sensibilities of Julian and Balthasar around suffering cannot be described merely as difference of emphasis, I think, or ascribed merely to their differing contexts. Balthasar does not just lay a bit more stress on the darker side of things than Julian does, but gives the darkness itself a fundamentally different ontological status. This is perhaps what creates the theological atmosphere of his writings: in his thought we do not just find love and suffering close together—rather we see the distinction between them blurred. They become mutually internal to each other, so that fundamentally,

Balthasar's instinct seems to be something like this: if you plumb the depths of suffering you find love, and any genuine love must have a central dimension, a central motif, of suffering.

Linked to this differing stance towards the *privatio boni* tradition is another important difference between Julian and Balthasar, a difference regarding the *intelligibility* of sin and evil. The two theologians differ not only in ontology, one could say, but in epistemology.

Trying to understand the existence of sin is, as I've already mentioned, a key theme in Julian's *Revelations*. A modern free-will defense cannot be a solution for her because, with the classical theological tradition, she presumes a very different concept of divine transcendence than most modern thinkers do, a conception of divine transcendence according to which God's causation and our freedom go together rather than standing in opposition to one another.²⁹ And while her denial the reality of sin—the *privatio boni* strain in her thought—allows her to avoid any affirmation that God *causes* or *commits* sin, it does not get her off the hook, for it does not resolve the issue of where sin comes from or why God *permits* it.

But while the *Revelations* contain an intense struggle with the question of why there is sin, they contain no answer. Or more precisely, the answer they contain is no answer at all. Julian tells us that the Lord responds to her worried queries with the assurance 'Sin is befitting' and then, in the most famous of all the lines of the work 'but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of

²⁹ Cf. Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1988) for a discussion of the general patterning of premodern Christian thought along these lines, and the second chapter of Turner's *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* for an exploration of this point specifically in relation to Julian.

thing shall be well' (27) ³⁰. Why is sin 'befitting'? That is never specified. How shall all be well, and all manner of thing be well? Again, it is not explained. True, Julian is told of a great, secret deed that God shall do at the end of time—but it is a deed which we cannot now know and which we should not seek to find out.³¹

So in Julian's thought, where suffering and love are conceptually distinct and indeed sharply contrasted, the presence of darkness in our experience, of sin and suffering, defeats explanation. Julian, and her readers with her, have no access to a unifying, integrated vision, where it can be understood *how* all things, including sin and suffering, fit together.³²

³⁰ 'Sinne is behovely, but alle shalle be wele, and alle shalle be wele, and all maner of thinge shalle be wel'. 'Appropriate' might be another translation of "behovely. Turner argues that 'behovely' is Julian's equivalent of the (equally difficult to translate) Latin '*conveniens*'.

³¹ While I am in general following Denys Turner in emphasising the centrality of the (unresolved) intellectual struggle around the 'fittingness' of sin in Julian, one place where my reading of Julian diverges from his is in the significance given to this 'deed' beyond our knowing. On Turner's reading, there is nothing more to expect after the Cross, which is 'the final outcome of that [final] conflict,' the conflict 'between sin and love' (21). Beyond the cross, Turner asserts, 'there is no concluding Resurrection narrative in Julian, no further episode of *dénouement*' (20). He sees the Cross, for Julian, as 'sin's defeat of love,' but this is in turn sin's own defeat, 'its power being exhausted by its very success'. The *meaning* of the Cross, which is the Resurrection, is 'that the vulnerability of love...is stronger than sin's power to kill' (21). What Turner outlines is a compelling account in its own right, but I do not myself detect in Julian any sense of love as 'vulnerability,' and while it is true that the cross is enormously central for Julian, I do not take it to be, for her, the conclusion of the whole drama: not only does her insistence on a great, secret deed work against this, but also the care which she takes, discussed above, to contain the cross and the associated suffering to a clearly finite period in time.

³² What about the parable of the Lord and the Servant? Does this, one might ask, not provide precisely a kind of unifying vision? I think Christopher Abbot is right to say that the vision of the Lord and the Servant does not offer 'a rationally appropriable formula.' It may be true that in her exploration of this elusive image Julian sets out 'to produce an integrated, large-scale interpretation of sinful humanity's relation to God, and to one another, through Christ,' but this does not mean she arrives at an understanding of *why* God *permits* sin. Christopher Abbot, *Julian of Norwich: Autobiography and Theology* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999) p. 90.

In Balthasar's work, on the other hand, there *is* such an integrating vision, a vision rooted in the inner-Trinitarian drama he describes. For this is a drama which in eternity, from before all time, combines love with something like suffering, and makes room at the very centre of the inner life of God for that which can become alienation and sin.

In *both* Julian and Balthasar we find a dimension of mystery as regards the relation of love and suffering, of the light and the dark, but it is a mystery of a fundamentally different kind, a different texture. For Julian what is mysterious is how two distinct and opposing elements fit into a single narrative. Our intellectual situation as she sees it is quite straight-forward to describe,: we do not know how to envisage all things together. There is a gap in our understanding. Our desire for an explanation, for a story that makes sense of both love and suffering, simply is not met. A life of faith is a life lived with a tension which, before the last day, cannot, for either Julian or her readers, be resolved.

Balthasar's theology has a more esoteric quality: the mystery is one that, if one has eyes to see, it is possible to some degree to penetrate. The mystery is that love itself, to those who truly understand it in the light of the cross, turns out to be something darker and more painful than is usually supposed. The fundamental mystery is not the co-existence of love and suffering, but their mutual inherence, perhaps even their ultimate identity.

V

Why should this matter? I suggested above that Balthasar and Julian can be seen to represent two strands within the tradition, two options open to Christian theology, and it is worth saying a little more in that connection.

Balthasar's sensibility towards suffering—as a kind of shorthand we might call it his 'embrace of suffering'—should be understood as part of a broader phenomenon. His is perhaps an extreme version, as his quite unusual exegesis indicates, but one finds tendencies in the same direction across a range of figures, from Simone Weil to influential Anglican theologians such as Donald MacKinnon. Or again, one finds hints of such a sensibility within quite widespread appeals to the vulnerability of God and in a current tendency to make free and wide-ranging use of the language of kenosis. So Balthasar's 'embrace of suffering' is worth considering not just because he himself is an influential thinker, but because he can stand in for a broader phenomenon.

But why compare him with Julian? A more expected contrast might be with Rahner. Usually, if Balthasar is going to be one of two strands, then Karl Rahner will be the other. But when Rahner and Balthasar are set off against one another, the difference is often conceived as a difference in their relationship to modernity, which Balthasar is thought to resist and Rahner to embrace. So to set up a Rahner/Balthasar contrast on this issue might be to encourage the supposition that Balthasar's embrace of suffering has something to do with an option for tradition against modernity, and I think this would be a mistake.

Contrasting Balthasar with Julian, then, is instructive for a number of reasons. First, Julian shows that a wholly positive, wholly joyful vision of love and of God is genuinely available within the tradition—even from within a moment in the theological tradition when the Black Death is a living memory,

and when a pious person one can sincerely pray to undergo nearly-mortal illness. It is not merely a bit of fluffy, unserious contemporary optimism. In fact Balthasar's embrace of suffering pulls him away from aspects of the classical theological tradition to which Julian adheres. We have explored this in relation to the notion of evil as a *privatio boni*: something similar could be argued in relation to divine simplicity or to Christology. Secondly, in Julian we can see that such a wholly positive, wholly joyful vision of love and of God is not simply the result of forgetfulness or indifference to the darkness of our experience. One cannot say of Julian that she has simply not thought about suffering, or about the gravity of sin. It would be closer to the truth to say that these are the experiential starting points of her thought, its unquestioned presuppositions.

The Christian tradition, then, contains real variety, not just on the familiar level of theories of atonement and conceptions of redemption, but on a more fundamental level of sensibility, sensibility concerning the relation between darkness and light, between love and bliss on the one hand and suffering and loss on the other. While I've suggested that Julian sits far closer to the classical theological position shared with Augustine and Aquinas, this is not to deny that Balthasar's thought too has its roots somewhere in the tradition. A proper history of Christian theology and suffering has yet to be written, but Balthasar's embrace of suffering would likely need to be located within a later-developing strand, a strand which perhaps has a beginning in the late medieval period, which gains some ground in the Counter-Reformation and flowers in the 19th century.

How are we to make a choice between these two strands, then, these two possibilities the tradition offers us? Should we suppose that the classical vision is

the more authentic, or on the contrary that the strand which Balthasar represents is a necessary and important development, a blossoming of a central but previously neglected dimension of the Christian mystery?

It may not be possible to offer conclusive arguments in one direction or the other—too many factors are likely to influence one’s judgment. My own instincts, however, are on the side of Julian. To me it seems right to live with unresolved questions, to acknowledge that the search for answers hits a kind of road-block on sin, suffering and evil, rather than to strive, by way of an embrace of suffering, towards something like an integrated vision. Balthasar’s approach allows him perhaps to come closer to making sense of the darkness of our world, but the cost is high: if suffering is integrated right into the heart of love, it seems hard to see how the good news of the Gospel can remain good.